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Gorbachev's Commandos . . .

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Mikhail Gorbachev's charm and easygoing manner have impressed some wishful Western European leaders who hope he may be the reasonable Soviet boss who will finally remove the specter of East-West war that has haunted them for 40 years.

But before they're swept off their feet by the Soviet leader's wiles, our NATO allies should consider this: Gorbachev's underlings have drawn up detailed contingency plans that call for the elimination of the very dignitaries who are making excuses for him.

According to our intelligence sources, during his relatively short tenure as head man in the Kremlin, Gorbachev has beefed up the Special Purpose Forces whose mission is to kidnap or assassinate the key leaders of NATO countries in the hours before a Soviet blitzkrieg is launched against Western Europe.

Our sources tell us that the Soviet military intelligence service, the GRU, now has 20 "Spetsnaz" companies whose job is to disrupt NATO governments with behind-the-lines commando strikes that would include killing the top leadership. The contingency plans even call for kidnapping the Swedish royal family to make sure Sweden doesn't decide to drop its historic neutrality and join NATO forces against the Soviets in the event of war.

Each Spetsnaz company consists of 115 men and women, all of them professional soldiers, linguists and expertly trained assassins.

The infiltration technique is part of an audacious Soviet strategy for a lightning-fast, non-nuclear victory over NATO troops. The clandestine Spetsnaz missions would be followed up by regular army forces attacking in lightly armed, highly mobile units called Operational Maneuver Groups.

A crucial factor in the Soviet strategy is the difference between the monolithic Warsaw Pact command structure and NATO's confederation of 16 sovereign members. It would take at least 96 hours for NATO to mobilize its Forward Defense, not counting the time it would take for consultation among the member nations.

The Pentagon is all too grimly aware of the situation. A few years ago, in a Top Secret report to President Reagan, the Joint Chiefs of Staff described the results of "dynamic war games [which] dealt with hypothetical conventional battles projected for 1986 between NATO and the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe and Northern Norway." The results were appalling.

"The war games assumed that the Warsaw Pact had 15 days for mobilization and NATO had 10 days . . . and that all members [plus France] of each alliance participated. . . .

"In addition, the war games posited a U.S.-Soviet conflict in the Persian Gulf that had been in progress for 60 days at the time of NATO D-Day. Finally, throughout the conflict neither chemical nor nuclear weapons were used by either NATO or the Warsaw Pact."

Even with the deck stacked in NATO's favor this way, "by the end of Day 5, the Warsaw Pact attack had penetrated past the NATO forward general defense positions," the Joint Chiefs' report continued. "On Day 19, the Warsaw Pact broke through NATO's rear defensive line and started moving rapidly westward. Finally, the war game was terminated on Day 24, when NATO was unable to maintain a cohesive defense."

In a real war, it is unlikely that NATO's nonnuclear defense would last even 24 days. That's because the Soviets would almost certainly use chemical weapons early in the conflict.

In fact, the entire U.S. intelligence community, led by the CIA, specifically warned about the likelihood of "Soviet use of chemical weapons coupled with surprise," in a special national intelligence estimate.

Even worse, though the Joint Chiefs didn't tell Reagan, the Pentagon's computer whizzes hadn't factored in the Spetsnaz chaos-and-confusion operations. Yet according to recent intelligence reports, many of these commando teams have been specially trained in the use of chemical and biological weapons as well as standard arms.

The devastating damage that special forces can do was described to us recently by Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary Noel Koch, who is in charge of American special forces:

"Imagine a guy who drives a truck right into the general's bivouac, ostensibly to deliver the general's port-a-potty," Koch said. "He's in dungarees, got two days' worth of beard, looks the part. The truck's got the right markings, even has the potties. And the guy gets out, walks up and hangs a little 'Gotcha!' on the general, telling him he is no longer among us."

Koch has argued for more of this kind of exercise, "because our conventional forces need to know what it's going to be like in real life if they have to cope with Spetsnaz."

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